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ABSTRACT

A review of minority education, particularly Black education, shows that it has been characterized by two crippling problems: lack of access and inequality. Beginning about 1935 and continuing until this day, there has been one court case after another involving access or some other form of unequal educational opportunity for Blacks. Some progress has been made in terms of access, improvements in Black colleges and universities, desegregation, and enrollment. Nevertheless, there are still enormous problems of retardation, inequality, and attrition, with their direct effects upon access and opportunity, especially in the northern ghettos. The Hispanic experience has been similar, with some major differences in terms of language and cultural differences, lack of a system of colleges similar to the Black system, and lack of data. If minority children are to break out of a cycle of failure, fundamental changes must be made, based on the following principles: skillful, dedicated teachers are the key to improvement; a positive self-concept is essential; home and school must reinforce each other; students must understand the importance of education; basic school conditions as well as student assessment must be improved; academic talent must be identified and nurtured; and minority role models must be used. (CMG)

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EDUCATION OF MINORITY STUDENTS: PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

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Dr. Jackson put his instructions for this presentation in these words: "We would like you to focus on the topic of the educational evolution for Black Americans—expanding the focus from issues of access and retention to promoting academic success for minority students." To do justice to so comprehensive an assignment would require a presentation of unendurable length. But I shall resist the temptation; in fact, I shall deal with the evolution of education for Black Americans in a very capsuled form.

As I reflected on how to deal with the evolution aspect of the task, it occurred to me that my own long life spans more than half the time since 1865 and that I have personally experienced or witnessed half of that evolution and that I could illustrate most of its aspects from my own experience—I hope without appearing to be self-serving.

Problems of access and inequality

As we review the education of Blacks over the 115 years since 1865, we find that it has been characterized by two very crippling problems: the problem of access to both schools and colleges and the problem of inequality—the unequal public school systems and the unequal higher education systems that served Black people almost 100 of those 115 years.

These persistent problems have had profound consequences and implications that, in effect, have to this day made equality of opportunity for Blacks impossible and have resulted in wasted lives for uncounted numbers of them. Let me illustrate something of the nature

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of the problem of access. The problem of access gave rise to the Black college in the first place. My mother and father attended Shaw University and, for them, it was Shaw or some similar private Black college or nothing.

When I began elementary school, there was no public elementary school system for Blacks in the South worthy of the name and no public high school system for Blacks at all. The Julius Rosenwald Fund devised an ingenious formula for building a reasonably adequate elementary school system for Blacks in the South. That formula involved one-third of the cost of a school building being raised by Blacks, one-third by the city or county, and one-third given by the Rosenwald Fund. More than 5,000 such schools were built, and I am a graduate of a six-month Rosenwald school with a seventh grade education—the style in North Carolina at the time.

When I finished the seven-grade school, there was no public high school for Blacks within a radius of 125 miles of my home. In fact, even a major city like Atlanta did not have a public high school for Blacks until 1924. There were prvate academies in various places in the region, and Black institutions such as Howard, Fisk, Morehouse, and Hampton had academies attached. This consituted a serious problem, my father having died when I was five. But somehow I managed to enter the academy at Hampton Institute, from which I was graduated, as that department was being phased out, in next to the last of its classes. I knew about Hampton because my mother's twin sister had gone there. But I was the only youngster out of my elementary school class to go directly to high school. This was typical of the time and the region.

Following my graduation from college in 1934, I was employed to teach in a three-teacher high school in Maryland. I taught the high school sciences and world history, and, except for four alcohol lamps, my total scientific equipment and supplies for general science, biology, chemistry, and physics were in two shoe boxes. In many ways, this high school was typical of very many Black high schools at that time. It did not approach its White counterpart in building, equipment, curriculum, or anything else, and no one expected it to.

As a young Black college graduate, I did not have access to any public graduate program or professional school anywhere in the South. Later, when I was a young college teacher, the state of North Carolina paid my tuition for doctoral study at New York University.

Progress through litigation

Beginning about 1935 and continuing until this day, a period of some 45 years, there has scarcely been a year without one or more cases involving access or some other form of unequal educational opportunity for Blacks before the courts of this land.

I first served as an expert witness in a federal court in 1950—30 years ago. The issue was unequal schools in the separate-but-equal era. Just two years later, I served as an expert witness of record in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* when desegregation was thought to be the answer to the problems of access and inequality. That case was decided 26 years ago. Ironically, I am presently retained by the U.S. Department of Justice in the *Adams* case in Louisiana. This case has as its purpose desegregation of public higher education—an effort to enforce Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—and, too, involves the critical problems of access and inequality.

In the intervening years, some substantial progress has been made, despite the *DeFunis* and *Bakke* cases:

- Access for Blacks *has* been improved.
- Black colleges and universities *have been* greatly improved; four public ones having been authorized to confer doctoral degrees.
- Public school systems, especially in the South, have made substantial progress toward desegregation.
- More than 1 million Blacks are now enrolled in higher education, nearly 80 percent of them in predominantly White institutions, although approximately 50 percent are in community colleges. This enrollment picture would have seemed incredible just 15 years ago.

It is important to recognize the progress made because it represents the product of effort on the part of many people and, if effort does not produce some progress, future effort would be difficult to justify or sustain. Nevertheless, there are still crippling problems of retardation, inequality, and attrition with their direct effects upon access and opportunity, especially in the northern ghettos. In this connection, I could scarcely believe what the Kerner Commission report said following the Detroit riot in 1967: That just to bring the

teacher-pupil ratio of the ghetto schools in Detroit in line with the average for the state of Michigan would require 16,500 additional teachers at a cost of some $13 million annually. This, of course, was never done.

The Hispanic experience

The Hispanic educational experience has been similar to that of Blacks, but with some major differences:

1. Many Hispanic children lack a working command of the English language in situations where the medium of instruction—textbooks, workbooks, libraries, and the spoken word—is English.
2. The schools have done far too little to understand and utilize the cultural differences Hispanic children bring to the educative process.
3. A system of colleges and universities similar to the Black colleges and universities is lacking.
4. Very little factual information exists that describes the inequities and the disparities upon which corrective programs must be built.

Just in the past few weeks, the National Center for Education Statistics has issued a 268-page report entitled *The Condition of Education for Hispanic Americans*, which, as far as I am aware, is the first comprehensive look at the fundamental problems of Hispanics by the federal government. It paints a grim picture:

- Nineteen percent of the Hispanic youth between the ages of 14 and 19 drop out during high school or even sooner.
- Forty percent of all Hispanics between the ages of 18 and 24 do not graduate from high school.
- Nine percent between the tender ages of 8 and 13 are two or more years below their grade levels.
- Only 49 percent of an estimated 766,000 Hispanic children who speak little or no English are receiving instruction in English or bilingual training.

The best that can be said where American Indian children are concerned is that their situation is far more serious than that of either the Blacks or the Hispanics. Here again, hard data are difficult to obtain.

Urban ghettos

Just a week ago, the *Washington Post* carried an article on the public schools of the District of Columbia, which are about 90 percent Black. I cite just two statistics from that article because they are characteristic of Blacks and other minorities in major urban centers where these populations are concentrated:

1. Students in the District of Columbia score some 200 points below the national average on the SAT and rank in the lowest 20 percent of all students in the nation taking the test.
2. The average ninth grader in the D.C. schools reads and does mathematics at the sixth-grade level. That is a retardation of three years.

This last statistic reminds me of the saddest educational document on public schools I have ever read. It was published in 1964, entitled *Youth in the Ghetto*, and prepared by Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited. I mention this because it was published 16 years ago, and I am persuaded by all I read today that little or nothing has changed fundamentally where ghetto schools are concerned.

Cycle of failure

Dr. Jackson's instructions included the tough problem of promoting academic success for minority students. There is neither the time, nor do I have the wisdom, to do much more than touch the surface of this aspect of the assignment, but, directly or indirectly, I have been wrestling with this problem most of my professional life, and I have reached the point where I have more humility about it than I had 25 years ago, having, during the intervening years, read more studies, attended more conferences, and engaged in more bull sessions on this issue than I can even begin to recall.

If we are serious about promoting academic success for minority

students, the first thing we have to do is to recognize the enormous complexity of the problem. Once this recognition takes place, we know that cosmetic approaches will accomplish nothing. Many cosmetic approaches and even some fundamentally sound ones have been attempted, but very few, to my knowledge, have dealt with the complexity in any fundamental way. Let me suggest some of the dimensions of the complexity.

The children and youth we are concerned about are caught up in what Deborah Elkins once called a "vicious cycle of failure," and this vicious cycle is sustained by what Dan Dodson, some years ago, called the powerlessness of the minority community, which damages the self-image of its members. We get some sense of the powerlessness of this community when we realize that 25 percent of the Hispanics and 27 percent of the Blacks in the nation are *below* the 1975 poverty line. This tends to breed not only powerlessness but hopelessness. Effective education requires a postive self-image; it likewise requires some optimism concerning the future—the belief that effort makes a real difference.

The home, being the first "school" that all of us attend, is critical in the education of the child. The typical minority home in our inner cities cannot do for the preschool child what the middle-class American home can and does do. A minority child may not even have a quiet place to study. Thus, the typical minority child brings to school a vocabulary that is too small to achieve academic success in school, a stunted self-image, no clear sense, provided by the home, of what education can do for him or her, and few role models to emulate. More importantly, the great probability is that the minority child will be taught by teachers trained to teach only American middle-class youngsters. Ironically, these teachers can be White or Black or Hispanic. Moreover, because minority students are different, too many teachers are quick to stop trying to motivate them or hold high expectations for them.

Everything points to the need for minority children to have schools that are at least equal to those provided for middle-class American children and that are, in addition, sensitive and responsive to the special needs of minority children. But everyone knows that this is far from the case; they are, instead, overcrowded, staffed by inexperienced teachers, and housed in old, unattractive buildings. What is more, they are characterized by serious retardation, high dropout rates, and the "cycle of failure."

Eight principles for success

This brings me to what I call the eight principles for the academic success of minority children:

1. The key change agent for promoting academic success on the part of minority students must be skillful, dedicated teachers who respect children and youth, who actually believe they can and will learn if properly taught, and who understand the types of homes and cultures from which these children come. Such teachers do not survive and develop unless they have educational leaders who believe the same things.

2. The development of minority children's self-concept or self-image is essential to academic success. They must be imbued with the conviction that they can, with the necessary effort, succeed in doing school work and even excel in those things in which they have talent. Even the Supreme Court of the United States recognized this basic principle in the landmark *Brown* decision. "A sense of inferiority," it said, "affects the motivation of a child to learn."

3. The reinforcement of the home—especially at the elementary level—must be appropriately involved. It must share with the school the expectations for the child.

4. The minority child must be taught that education is not only important but that it is imperative for life in America beyond mere existence and that, like other things in life, the prizes, at every stage, generally go to those who excel.

5. The basic conditions of the schools must be made conducive to learning—meaning, among other things, that disgracefully high pupil-teacher ratios cannot be tolerated and that the key tool subjects of reading and mathematics must be taught in classes small enough to assure success. For new evidence, such as that provided by Glass, Cahen, Smith, and Filby, shows that significant progress is made when classes are made small enough—20 and below.

6. The assessment of student progress—thoroughgoing assessment—must be made at critical points on the educational ladder to determine whether students are performing at grade level or not, whether that fatal retardation is cumulating or not. These criti-

cal points tend to occur at about grade 5 and toward the end of junior high school, when reading skills, mathematical skills, and basic writing skills are at their critical stages. Those in need of help would then be required to attend summer sessions under the best teachers that can be found in the system. Informed counseling would be a part of the program.

7. The identification of those with academic talent should be a continuing process, with special efforts made to nurture talent and use it, where possible, for leavening purposes.
8. The extensive use of minority role models should be a regular part of the program, preferably in small groups where questions can be asked and something approaching "hands-on" contacts can be made.

Some compelling considerations

The justification for this conference rests, I think, upon some compelling considerations:

1. A sound education is now the only reasonably assured means by which a minority child can have a fighting chance to survive and advance in this increasingly sophisticated society of ours.
2. The public education provided for the overwhelming majority of the poor and the minorities of this nation is not adequate to provide a fighting chance for survival and upward mobility.
3. Serious concern for this problem has gone out of style in this era of Proposition 13 mentality, changing national priorities, and rising conservatism.
4. Without some very effective interventions, the situation will get worse, not better. This makes the situation urgent.

We have some very thoughtful people addressing us during the course of this conference and some very thoughtful participants to respond, to question, to suggest, and to recommend. I hold high the hope that, by the time we adjourn, something will happen here that will set in motion a renewed attack on one of America's most serious problems—a problem that will be exacerbated by the prospect that the minority youth of this nation will constitute 25 to 30 percent of

the population by the year 2000. And these minority students, with whom we are concerned, will echo the words of Ralph Ellison:

> If you show me how I can cling to that
> which is real in me,
> While teaching me a way into the larger society,
> Then I will not only drop my hostility, but
> I will sing your praises and I will help
> You make the desert bear fruit.

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